



### Hangster's Gate

Winter came early to the Shropshire town: a cold wind with brief hail that changed suddenly to rain to leave a damp covering of mist.

An old man in an old cart drawn by a sagging pony crossed himself as he saw Yapp shuffle by him along the cobbled lane toward the entrance to the Raven Inn. It was warm, inside the ancient Inn, but dark from fire and pipe smoke, and Yapp took his customary horn of free ale to sit alone on his corner bench by the log fire. The silence that had followed his entrance soon filled, and only one man still stared at him.

The man was Abigail's husband, and he pushed his cap back from his forehead before moving toward Yapp. His companions, dressed like him in their work clothes, tried to restrain him, but he pushed them aside. He reached Yapp's table and kicked it aside with his boot.

Slowly Yapp stood up. He was a wiry man and seemed insubstantial beside the bulk of Abigail's husband.

"Wha you been doin? To her!" Abigail's husband clenched his fists and moved closer.

Yapp stared at him, his unshaven face twitching slightly, and then he smiled.

"I canna move! I canna move!" shouted Abigail's husband.

Yapp smiled again, drank the rest of his ale and walked slowly toward the door.

"I be beshrewed!" the big man cried among the silence.

Yapp turned to him, made a gesture with his hand and left the Inn as Abigail's husband found himself able to move.

No one followed Yapp outside.

A carriage and pair raced past him as he walked down the lane. The young lady inside, heading for the warmth and comfort of Priory Hall was alarmed at seeing him and turned away. This pleased him, as the prospect of the walk to his cottage, miles distant, pleased him – for it was the night of Autumnal Equinox.

The journey was not tiresome, and he enjoyed the walk, the mist and darkening sky that came with the twilight hour. The moon would be late to rise, and he walked briskly. Soon, he was above the town and at the place where the three lanes met. His own way took him down, past the small collection of cottages, almshouses and a church, toward the wooded precincts of Yarchester Hall. He stopped, once, but could not see the distant summit of Brown Clee Hill where he had possessed Abigail.

It had been a long ride back in the wind and the rain, but the horses had been strong, almost wild, and he smiled in remembrance, for that night Abigail has warmed his bed.

Tomorrow, perhaps, they might go to Raven's Seat. It would be all over by then, for another seventeen years. No one would stop or trouble them.

His way lead into the trees, along a narrow path, down the Devil's Dingle to Hangster's Gate and the clearing. There was nothing in the clearing – except the mist-swathed gibbet with its recent victim swinging gently in the breeze. He would need the hand, and with practised care, he unsheathed his knife to stretch and cut the dead man's left hand away.

Less than a day old, the body had already lost its eyes to ravens.

It was not far from the clearing to his cottage, and he walked slowly, every few moments stopping to stand and listen. There was nothing, no sound – except a faint sighing as the breeze stirred the trees around. A lighted candle shone from the one small window of his cottage. It was a sign, and he stopped to creep down and glimpse inside. There were voices inside and as he looked he saw Abigail standing near a young man. He saw her draw the youth toward her and place his hand on her breast. Heard her laughing; saw her kiss the youth and press her body into his. Then she was

dancing around him, laughing and singing as she stripped her clothes away to lay naked and inviting on the sphagnum moss that formed the mattress of Yapp's bed. Then the youth was upon her, struggling to wrest himself from his own clothes.

Yapp heard people approaching along the track and he stood up to hear Abigail's cries of ecstasy. He waited, until they reached him and they all heard Abigail climax with a scream. Then he was inside the cottage, with the others around him. The youth was surprised and tried to stand and Yapp stood aside to let them pin him down on the hard earth floor of the cottage.

An old woman in a dirty bonnet gave a toothless laugh – Abigail laughed, even Yapp laughed as the tall blacksmith tore out the youth's heart. The was a pail for some of the blood.

Abigail was soon dressed, the body taken away and she led Yapp and the old woman through the trees to another clearing. The moon was rising, the blood was fresh and she took the severed hand from Yapp to dip it in the blood and sprinkle their sacred ground to propitiate their Dark Goddess Baphomet.

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